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Introduction: Cross Intentions

At the beginning of Christianity there are two crosses:
One is a real cross, the other a symbol.[1]

—Jürgen Moltmann

In her introduction to *Cross Examinations*, Marit Trelstad remarks that the meaning of the cross is dependent upon the context in which it is found.[2] One can hardly dispute her point: a burning cross on the lawn of an African American home in the mid twentieth-century does not have the same meaning as a cross mounted at the focal point of a contemporary African American church. Nor does the symbol of the cross have the same meaning when worn as a fashion accessory today as it once did in its crude representations on the shields of Constantine's army. Like any symbol the cross is open to the changes of context in which it is found, its meaning dependent upon the collective intentions of those appropriating it.

But the cross is not just any symbol, it is the symbol *par excellence* of the Christian faith and so there is an understandable reaction against any suggestion that its meaning is dependent upon variable contexts. Surely the salvific meaning of the cross is fixed in the event itself—forever locked down in Christ's outstretched arms and pierced feet. And indeed, ever since the early Church reflected upon what happened on the cross, Christians have proclaimed a consistent message: "Christ died for our sins" (1 Cor 15:3). But the question of how Christ's death functions to "save" us from our sins remains. What is it, in other words, that makes the atonement "work"? And it is here that Christian reflection has not been univocal,

1. Moltmann, "The Cross as Military Symbol for Sacrifice," 259.
2. Trelstad, *Cross Examinations*, 3–4.

its many voices offering up a range of images and metaphors all of which attempt in some way to capture a facet of the truth that is confessed. And it is here, too, that Moltmann's point in the epigraph is valid, for while there is a "real" cross locked away in human history, the "symbol" of the cross has grown large through Christian reflection, becoming much more than a simple retelling of the facts themselves.

This point is readily discernible even from within the pages of the New Testament. What we find expressed therein is not a reduction of the power of the cross to a single understanding but a number of metaphors and images that collectively weave a tapestry of meaning: Jesus' death is, amongst others, the death of the Paschal lamb (1 Cor 5:7), the inauguration of a new covenant (Heb 8:8; 9:15), the paid ransom price (Mark 10:45), a sin offering (Rom 8:3) and an example to follow (1 Pet 2:21). The fact that these multiple reflections exist is perhaps why the Nicene Creed simply stated without any elaboration that Christ died "for us and for our salvation."[3] It seems the early church quickly recognized that the meaning of the cross readily transcended any one interpretation. Of course, since the creed does not specify how salvation is actually effected by the cross, theories of atonement are left to describe for themselves how it is that the cross functions *pro nobis* to their communities. And so diverse motifs emerged as differing cultures and contexts appropriated the cross event anew.

An obvious example is the emergence of the Satisfaction motif during the Middle Ages. It was the developing feudal context of that era that led Anselm of Canterbury to take offence at the then traditional motif, which had systematized the cross' victory into an explanation of how God had tricked Satan into giving up his hold on fallen humanity.[4] Horrified at the thought that God should have to respect Satan in any way, Anselm contended that what was really at issue was the fact that honor was owed to God by a rebellious humanity who had failed to uphold their responsibilities in the lord-vassal relationship.[5] The death of the incarnate Son was the only means by which that responsibility could be met, thereby restoring the honor lost to God and righting what was wronged.

3. It might also be said that one of the reasons for this lack of precise definition in the creeds was due to the fact that none of the post-apostolic presentations on the atonement were deemed heretical enough to evoke an official or "orthodox" church response. See Brümmer, *Atonement, Christology and the Trinity*, 66.

4. Anselm, *Why God Became Man?,* I.6.

5. Ibid., I.7, II.6, II.15.

Anselm's conception was not only logically and contextually coherent it also made a lot of popular sense. The First Crusade was being preached and there was a strong drive to rid the infidel from the Holy Land in order to restore God's honor.[6] Therefore to portray salvation in the same terms had immense popular appeal and gained easy and immediate traction. However, there is also no doubt that this interpretation would have made little sense *prior* to the rise of feudalism, and indeed, much of the motif's power was lost with feudalism's decline. But what is often glossed over in what Anselm achieved is that the satisfaction motif was a clear departure from the traditional (ransom) understanding of how the cross saves. He did not consider it necessary to hold on to the previous articulation at all costs but rather saw the need for a new framework of understanding that connected with his own context. What is interesting, is that far from decrying Anselm's work as an abandonment of received truth, the Christian community welcomed his reflections as a valid and appropriate way of conveying the mechanism of salvation. Naturally, not everyone agreed and Anselm's work prompted additional reflections, the most notable being Peter Abelard's moral influence theory. But what such fluidity demonstrates is that cultural context has an important and indeed fundamental role in the development and appropriation of the cross' saving significance. It is therefore not unorthodox in and of itself to postulate alternative meanings for the cross event that differ from previous reflections.

And for this reason alone it would be rather presumptuous to declare Christian reflection on the atonement closed or to consider the soteriological narrative definitively told. On the contrary, it must be strongly asserted that it is not possible to simply repeat the words of the Bible, Fathers, or the Reformers and expect to gain a hearing within our own contemporary context. Their terms and expressions are valuable, but this does not relieve us of the responsibility to articulate the saving message of the Gospel in contemporary language and within the constituted meaning of our own culture. Indeed, this is the very thing that the biblical writers, Fathers, and Reformers did themselves and it is what made their contribution so contextually meaningful.[7]

6. For the idea of crusading during this period see Riley-Smith, *The First Crusade*, 31–57.

7. This does not mean that their language is of no use today, for it provides a discernible and valuable starting point for our own reflection. But the need for ongoing reflection is not diminished by an appeal either to tradition or the biblical witness. Gunton, *Yesterday and Today*, 3–5.

Simply put, changing cultures and contexts demand new articulations, or at least re-articulations of salvific motifs, in order that the saving significance of the cross can continue to be meaningfully appropriated. Of course, this means that an essential characteristic of individual reflections which needs to be acknowledged is that they are inherently *temporal*.[8] "Images of Christ and conceptions of salvation bear the mark of the prevailing cultural consciousness and are only temporarily relevant," writes Herman-Emiel Mertens. "They are not always and everywhere equally useful."[9] Yet because of the universal significance of the cross in Christian redemption, Mertens' point often gets overlooked. The overwhelming theological temptation is to elevate (our favorite) motifs above cultural considerations and declare them to be equivalently universal. This is arguably what Bernard of Clairvaux did in energetically defending the Anselmian motif against Abelard's moral influence theory.[10] And if so, then Saint Bernard is not alone. More than once in Christian history has today's contextual theology comfortably drifted into tomorrow's entrenched dogma. What makes sense to us now is naively assumed to make sense to everyone and to do so for all time. As Douglas Hall recognizes, the problem with some atonement theologies,

> is that they are sometimes so perceptive and brilliant that they last beyond their appropriate time—and, at the same time, they are perpetuated longer than they should be because too few Christians have the courage to enter into the new, emerging darkness and prefer to rely on the old light of entrenched soteriologies.[11]

Without a doubt, the old light is both familiar and comforting, but as time goes on it does struggle to illuminate the far corners of the present. But this is not to say that it is time for the old light to be disconnected, it is merely an acknowledgement that there is a need for other lights to shine as well. Indeed, this is the experiential reality of the cross. Its power is always evidenced anew in the lives of individuals as the death of Jesus of Nazareth overcomes the horror of their fallen contingent existence. And just as that existence is not static but always changing from culture to culture and from generation to generation, so too there is a dynamism in salvific experience that cannot be limited to the static expressions of its activity.

8. Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 214.
9. Mertens, *Not the Cross*, 63–64.
10. Bernard, of Clairvaux, *Contra quaedam*, c.8, in PL 182.1069.
11. Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*, 130.

While some will no doubt counter this last statement with concerns of relativism, it is a position that is evidenced by the continuous recreation of human life when brought face-to-face with the crucified and risen Christ. We must never forget that it is *people* who are saved—not theological expressions. Unsurprisingly then, I find much value in the recent scholarly criticism that is concerned to reawaken the wider Christian community to the particularities of their own *Sitz im Leben*. Christ's death remains *pro nobis*, but the challenges facing our own communities must be considered in understanding how it is that the death of Christ functions "for us," in the here and now. This is certainly not to deny that there is a universal problem for humanity that requires a divine solution, but it is to say that such a solution is inherently personal and is received as such. Positively, this conclusion means there is a great deal of space for Christians to find within the death of Christ a saving meaning that speaks directly to their individual and generational circumstances. Negatively, it inevitably means an endless stream of difference, nuance, continuity and even potential antithesis, as various accounts of what Christ was doing on the cross are appropriated by differing communities.[12] So while Christian theology can point to its historical unity in proclaiming the cross' soteriological purpose, its explanation as to precisely how the death of Christ is the means of salvation must be acknowledged as a point of ongoing discussion.

Do Limits Exist?

The obvious question to ask is whether there are any limits to interpreting the saving significance of the symbol of the cross. What is it that makes an interpretation faithful to the Christian tradition over against another that might not be? How do we judge between them? What makes us contend for one over another? As I have argued, community context must play a part in a motif's viability, but this simply recognizes the *differences* that arise in various contexts and the allowances needed for them. How can the theologian be sure that the results of their contextual investigations remain, despite their diversity, faithful to the Christian tradition?

Joel Green and Mark Baker briefly address this question towards the end of their *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*.[13] They conclude that there is, in fact, no way to guarantee short-term fidelity to authentic Christianity whilst the frontiers of Christian mission remain just that, frontiers.

12. Ray, *Deceiving the Devil*, 1.
13. Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal*, 217–21.

Previous perspectives are both important and suggestive but are not determinative for the believer who is trying to communicate the good news to a community which needs to hear it as "good news" for them.[14] However, they do express confidence for the longer term, a confidence they base in three particular faith statements. Firstly, they uphold that human ways of speaking about God, particularly God's activity in salvation, cannot fully circumscribe that divine activity and therefore there is no "one" way to talk about God's saving work and multiple motifs are to be expected. Secondly, is a commitment to the Scriptures as the basis for Christian faith and contextual presentations of the atonement will need to demonstrate adequate reflection on, and faithfulness to, the appropriate texts; and thirdly, is the belief that the Holy Spirit continually works through the community of God's people in creative and cautionary ways. These three points are certainly valid reflections and they are recognizable as an attempt to provide freedom for diversity in atonement theory whilst maintaining a foundation within the biblical witness. In this I find little with which to disagree, but in terms of the question posed these points do little to provide an answer. They more or less take a "wait and see" approach, in that there is a providential belief that "it will all be right in the end" but for now there is nothing, aside from perhaps fidelity to the biblical witness (whatever that might actually mean in practice), which could be considered theologically proactive. But is this all that can be said?

What I wish to contend is that a faithful atonement motif will demonstrate a degree of continuity *with the meaning that Jesus of Nazareth constituted for his death*, an emphasis, it must be said, which is not particularly evident in some of the more recent articulations. It is no doubt a poor parallel, but modern atonement discussions could be said to treat the Jesus of history as something of a novelty act. He is brought out with a flourish to defend in some way the theologian's perspective, and then just as quickly returned to the top-hat so as to not disturb the remainder of the show. Three representative examples to help describe what I mean by this will be given shortly, but it seems to me that if we are to take the doctrine of the incarnation seriously then we must also treat the historical intention of Jesus of Nazareth with the same respect. Yet this point is not as axiomatic as one might expect. There has been, and continues to be, significant debate as to whether the meaning Jesus created for his death is actually important, or even *relevant* to the Christian faith. The debate is by no means trivial either, for in practice (whatever our actual intentions

14. Ibid., 218.

may be), Jesus' self-understanding plays very little part in Christian interpretations of the cross. What we find throughout the Christian tradition is systemizations of a universal soteriology rather than direct historical questions as to what Jesus thought his death would accomplish. David Brondos puts the differential well:

> Ultimately, Jesus dies not because his words and actions were viewed as offensive or dangerous to the Jewish and Roman authorities, but because his death is regarded as necessary for some theological reason: only through the cross could forgiveness be won and sin, death and evil overcome in us and our world. Instead of looking to history to determine the causes of his death, we look outside or above history to some type of "metastory": the stories of salvation which we tell have to do, not so much with a first-century Galilean Jew in conflict with the religious authorities of his day, but with God's holy nature and the satisfaction of its just demands, the enslavement of all humankind to Satan, sin, death and evil and our subsequent liberation, or the creation of a "new humanity" embracing all who follow Christ's teachings and example or participate in his death and resurrection.[15]

The criticism of traditional models here is clear, but it seems to me that contemporary motifs also continue this trend, in part because of the modern skepticism concerning the reliability of historical knowledge, but also because of the theological interest to capture the universal salvific meaning of the cross for the contemporary context. This is not to say that theologians believe the cross was meaningless for Jesus of Nazareth, just that there is little theological interest in what that meaning might have actually been.[16] It is this focus on the universal soteriological narrative that allows Marit Trelstad to comfortably assert along with Moltmann that for the theologian there are in fact two crosses. There is the historical cross upon which Jesus was crucified and there is the cross of theological interpretation.[17] The two are joined in history, but as far as their meaning or interpretation is concerned they may as well be different entities.

Of course, the primary theological benefit of maintaining a distinction between faith and history is the freedom for the theologian to face the question of "why did Jesus die"? unencumbered by the exigencies of

15. Brondos, "Why Was Jesus Crucified?," 485.
16. A point that comes to full fruition in Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*.
17. Trelstad, *Cross Examinations*, 3.

the actual historical event. This is a point that Trelstad embraces since it clearly enables the theologian's vantage point to shape the particular symbolic meaning of the cross he or she wishes to appropriate. It is, therefore, not history that is important but its theological interpretation—and truth be told it is not at all clear that this is a bad thing. In many ways the distinction between faith and history functions to "protect" the theological task from the contingencies of history and even worse, the predilections of historians.

But one could also rightly ask whether or not this distinction inevitably divorces our understanding of the cross from the aims and intentions of Jesus himself? The answer must, of course, be given in the affirmative, but from the kerygmatic perspective does it really matter? After all, do we need to restrict ourselves to what Jesus thought he was doing in the first century, especially since it is possible that Jesus himself did not fully appreciate the meaning of his own death?[18] What impact would it have on Christian faith if it could be proven that Jesus of Nazareth actually had *no* conception that his death would have universal saving significance? For Bultmann, who was prepared to accept that Jesus' death could have been historically meaningless, the answer is absolutely nothing.[19] What is important to the faith community is not the underlying history of Jesus' death, but the contemporary preaching of its meaning and the subsequent existential encounter that occurs between the believer and the crucified Christ. On this he was quite clear:

> The salvation-occurrence is nowhere present except in the proclaiming, accosting, demanding, and promising word of preaching. A merely 'reminiscent' historical account referring to what happened in the past cannot make the salvation-occurrence visible. It means that the salvation-occurrence continues to take place in the proclamation of the word.[20]

From this perspective it appears that history has nothing to say to such an existential encounter and should be left in the past where it belongs and not unceremoniously dragged into the present.

Moreover, there is considerable danger in allowing history to dictate to theology because one is immediately forced to make a decision in regard to which history one should be referencing. The proliferation of the various "Lives of Jesus" in the nineteenth century, for example, made

18. O'Collins, *Interpreting Jesus*, 79.
19. Bultmann, "The Primitive Christian Kerygma," 22–24.
20. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, I.302.

trying to determine the particular "Jesus" one should put faith in incredibly difficult. Indeed, Lessing had already concluded that the exigencies of history are incapable of providing a basis for religious truth. It was simply far safer to stay on this side of the ditch and reflect on the ahistorical truths of orthodoxy than submit those truths to the uncertain waters of historical analysis.[21] A skeptical eye focused on the results of the "Third Quest" for the historical Jesus would easily relish Lessing's point. But can Christianity be successfully divorced from history? Many do not believe so. Even Bultmann's students struggled to maintain his historical pessimism and in a famous lecture by Ernst Käsemann the question was raised as to the impact such a position has on theological legitimacy.[22] Of particular concern was the potential damage that could occur to the doctrine of the incarnation, for without a firm footing in history it would inevitably become a lacuna, a nice idea about a justifying and saving God, but an idea that could just as easily have been the invention of the apostle Paul. But if God really did became flesh as the New Testament proclaims then we cannot abstract the eternal meaning of the cross from its historical actuality.

This is not to say that we therefore need a Christology from below over against a Christology from above.[23] To maintain such a distinction would inevitably lead to theological difficulties since *both* are required to be held in tension if a Chalcedonian Christology is to be upheld. The very fact that the human and divine, the eternal and the temporal, are present in one place and in one time means that, methodologically, there is always a double movement. The content of Christological language is required to be from above and, at the same time, from below.[24] In arguing then, for the importance of the intention of Jesus of Nazareth to a theology of atonement, I am not suggesting that a theological perspective must be minimized nor that the historical particulars are necessarily of greater

21. Hence his much quoted dictum: "accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason" (Chadwick, *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 53).

22. Käsemann, "Das Problem Des Historischen Jesus."

23. Indeed, as far as Pannenberg is concerned, to assert the value of the incarnation from the outset effectively rules out the approach as a Christology from below. Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, 33.

24. Any Christology that is excessively from above runs the risk of abstracting Jesus from history, just as an excessive emphasis on a Christology from below will abstract Jesus from eternity. Theology has continually demonstrated that there are elements of truth in both methods which is why they must be held in dialectic. Gunton, *Yesterday and Today*, 13.

significance. What I seek to do is to draw both theology and history together, upholding the importance of one without denying the value of the other.

I well recognize that such an endeavor has significant pitfalls and is often criticized as fanciful, if not actually impossible. It will, therefore, need to be extensively defended and we will do so primarily in chapter three. But for now the point to be made is that Jesus' intention for his death—that is, the meaning he created for it—should be investigated in the first instance for what it might contribute to a theology of the atonement. This is not to say that our atonement motifs must be limited to what we know of Jesus' self-intention, but it *is* to say that our motifs should not be articulated in abstract. Faith in the preached Christ cannot be allowed to float free from the Jesus of history. Without such an anchor, Christology itself pays the ultimate price.

Jesus' Intention in Recent Atonement Motifs

So how do contemporary atonement motifs deal with the Jesus of history? As one might expect, contemporary *Christ*-ian discussions on the atonement often do claim to be faithful in some way to the intention of Jesus, yet it is also immediately clear that what is claimed as Jesus' intention differs markedly from one presentation to the next. It is also apparent that the historical particulars of Jesus' mission, and of even his Judaic context, are most often pushed to one side in order to facilitate the fortuitous discovery that Jesus actually had an intention similar to the author's own presentation. What I have yet to discover is a theological work that attempts to seriously integrate the results of historical Jesus research into its own atonement discussion. This lack is, in fact, one of the main motivations for this present study as there is an urgent need to lay the necessary groundwork for a valid theological appropriation of history. For now, however, the immediate task is to provide some examples as to how the intention of Jesus is presently being appropriated in atonement discussions. It should go without saying that the three works chosen below are by no means the only examples that can be given but they are representative of the approaches being taken today.

We begin with Alan Mann's *Atonement for a "Sinless" Society*, which focuses on how redemption can be received by postmoderns through the locating of salvation in the possibility of the wholeness of self. The second example is from Mark Heim's *Saved from Sacrifice*, which appropriates a

Girardian anthropology to explain how Jesus' death functions to create the potential for a peaceful human society. And finally, John Milbank's *Being Reconciled* interprets Jesus' death as the divine offer of the capacity of intra-human forgiveness. While each of the soteriologies on offer will be briefly described, the focus here is not on evaluating the merits of their particular perspectives *per se*, but on how they variously appropriate the constituted meaning of Jesus of Nazareth.

Alan Mann: Atonement for a "Sinless" Society

A great example of an attempt to contextualize the atonement into contemporary terms can be found in Alan Mann's *Atonement for a "Sinless" Society*.[25] Contending that the current Western world no longer lives with the sense of sin and guilt that was characteristic of previous generations, Mann asks how Jesus' death might adequately respond to the primary problems of alienation and shame that now plague the postmodern, post-industrialized self. For while the intense emphasis on "self" in the postmodern era might have "freed" people from guilt (in that nothing "I" do is any longer wrong for *me*), it forces people into an alternative state of shame since it highlights their inability to realize their ideal-selves. Therefore what the postmodern craves, contends Mann, is "ontological coherence"—the meeting of the ideal and real selves—a meeting that will release the postmodern from the crippling effects of self-deficiency. Yet paradoxically, the way to ontological coherence is through mutual and unpolluted relationships, the very thing a postmodern cannot do because of their self-emphasis.

This, says Mann, is why the story of Jesus' death is so significant for the postmodern. It is a narrative of ontological coherence because Jesus who publicly announces his ideal self at the Last Supper (my body broken for you) demonstrates that his real self is one and the same by willingly hanging from the cross.

> Therefore, as Jesus stretches his arms out along the crossbeam, he is, at one and the same time, symbolically holding together his own story and 'exposing' his real-self without fear of incoherence or the malady of chronic shame that haunts the postmodern self; for he is, at this moment, "at-one."[26]

25. Mann, *Atonement for a "Sinless" Society*.

26. Ibid., 136–37.

Being "at-one," is the fulfilment of human authenticity because it is the moment at which our real-self (the actuality of our life) becomes our ideal-self (the person we aspire to be).[27] In so doing Jesus opens himself up to the "Other" and guarantees the presence of mutual and unpolluted relationships. It is, says Mann, this "Other-focused" living that brings about the *at-one-ment* so craved for by the post-industrialized self. However, owing to ontological incoherence, the postmodern is unable to follow Jesus into this "Other-focused" living on their own. The boundary must somehow be removed and it is removed, argues Mann, through the story of Jesus' death; it is only this narrative that has the potential to be the necessary counter-story to ontological incoherence.[28] Mann's presentation is significantly more nuanced than that just described, but at its heart is the contention that Jesus' death represents the fulfilment of ontological coherence and is therefore the divine way forward for human authenticity.[29]

But how is the reality of Jesus' ontological coherence to be appropriated by the postmodern? Mann comments that there is no *one* way; how the death of Jesus reconciles the isolated, alienated self to the "Other" can only be a personal interpretation since no two encounters with the storied-Jesus are ever the same. Yet he does offer a possible narrative, one that takes place through participation in the Eucharist, for it is this identifying rite that "allows the atoning work of Jesus to manifest itself in the lives of those who encounter it."[30] Through the Eucharistic liturgy, postmodern people are brought to an awareness that there is an absence of the "Other"—both human and divine—in right relationship with them. Hence it is the Eucharist that enables postmodern people to discover not just each "Other," but the transcendent "Other" to whom they can be reconciled; an "Other" who can recreate them without the chronic shame that so imprisons them.

It is not my purpose here to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of Mann's presentation but to ask how he appropriates the intention of Jesus of Nazareth in telling his atonement story. On one hand his thesis actually requires him to narrate Jesus' intent, because as he himself acknowledges, "without the intent of Jesus the cross itself becomes nothing more than a

27. Ibid., 38.

28. Ibid., 137.

29. Ibid., 134. On this, he quotes Douglas Hall approvingly: the cross reveals the "compassionate determination of God to bring humankind to the realization of its potentiality for authenticity" (Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*, 91).

30. Mann, *Atonement for a "Sinless" Society*, 10.

hollow act."[31] If Jesus' death is truly to be an example of ontological coherence then it cannot be an accidental event. It must be intentional and, indeed, he quotes Ben Meyer's insightful words from *The Aims of Jesus*: "Jesus did not aim to be repudiated and killed, he aimed to charge with meaning his being repudiated and killed."[32] On the other hand, however (and rather perplexingly given his quotation of Meyer), Mann contends that the historical Jesus has nothing to contribute to his narrative of atonement.[33] In fact, the historical Jesus is an "unnecessary distraction, for it is of no concern to the postmodern on their search for salvation."[34] There is then an interesting dialectic. Jesus' intent is necessary if his death is truly to be an example of ontological coherence, yet the historical Jesus has no possible bearing on such an intent. No doubt part of the reasoning behind this rejection of the historical Jesus lies in the postmodern incredulity towards historical truth, a point we will ourselves have to address in the third chapter. But primarily the rejection stems from a desire not to be limited to a narrative of "facts," which having occurred in a time and place long obscured by history, could not possibly offer a narrative that is able to be appropriated by the postmodern as their own. "[W]e seek" Mann writes, "a narrative possibility that is bearable and conceivable, and one that can be owned by the individual as meaningful and sufficient."[35] For the postmodern, the historical Jesus apparently provides no such possibility.

So what intent does Mann contend that Jesus narrates? Given our discussion thus far, it is of no surprise to find that Jesus' intention is strikingly revealed in the Last Supper. The meal is important not only because in Jesus' ministry meals were moments of reconciliation (Matt 9:10–13; Luke 14:1–4; 19:1–9) but because here at the final meal Jesus narrates his purpose for coming. The breaking of bread and the offering of wine symbolically narrate Jesus' intention to die and this reveals to the postmodern Jesus' ideal self. His intent to die will ultimately prove his ontological coherence because on the cross his real-self is displayed without shame. This coherence opens the door to the "Other" even to the "Other" that betrays and abandons him. Mann notes that Jesus maintained an openness to the "Other" right to the very end. His intent can therefore be seen in the giving

31. Ibid., 113.

32. Ibid., 107, quoting Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*, 218.

33. Mann understands the "historical Jesus" to be the Jesus reconstructed by historical research. We will have more to say about this in the third chapter.

34. Mann, *Atonement for a "Sinless" Society*, 107.

35. Ibid., 108.

up of his life so that "living within mutual, undistorted, unpolluted self-relating and 'Other-relating' may become a real possibility."[36]

The question I have for Mann's thesis is whether the rejection of the historical intention of Jesus of Nazareth functions to remove Jesus from the meaning of the cross. The intention that Mann finds in the Last Supper narrative is patently not that of Jesus of Nazareth, as indeed, Mann acknowledges. It is, instead the meaning of a post-Easter reflection created to respond directly to the cultural situation Mann is addressing. The meaning that Mann therefore finds is not the meaning inherent in the historical event, nor is it the meaning of the incarnate Son, but a meaning shaped along the lines of a perceived soteriological need. Perhaps this is the cost of coherent contextualization, but need it be? Is the narrative of the Jesus of history so out-of-touch with the humanity of today? Mann acknowledges that his presentation will cause consternation among many Christians for its perceived unorthodoxy, but the problem I have is not in the novelty of its presentation but in its ahistorical precondition. To assert that the import of the narrative that confronts the postmodern is not the storied intention of one man two thousand years ago but the divine story of ontological coherence that finds its ultimate expression in that one man is to separate the divine meaning of the cross from the intention of Jesus himself. But as I intend to argue, the two cannot be separated; the divine meaning created for the cross event is the very meaning Jesus of Nazareth constituted for it.

S. Mark Heim: Saved from Sacrifice

This recent offering from Mark Heim is one of the better presentations of Christian atonement from the perspective of Girardian anthropology.[37] Previous efforts by both Raymund Schwager and Anthony Bartlett have demonstrated just how valuable the Girardian insight is to a re-reading of the Gospels,[38] and Heim writes similarly, drawing particular attention to the importance of the passion narratives themselves. In his engaging style he argues that Jesus' death is the decisive revelation of the scapegoat mechanism in history and having revealed the mechanism, the Gospels declare its power forever broken. Thus, the key feature of the book is the contention that the significance of the cross is found in the way it reveals

36. Ibid., 114.

37. Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice*.

38. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama of Salvation*; Bartlett, *Cross Purposes*.

the dynamic of scapegoating violence that encompasses both individuals and communities.[39]

And what is this "dynamic of scapegoating violence"? Girard posits that it is the mechanism by which peace and order is restored to a community that has suffered from internal conflict. As a community's cohesion begins to crumble due to hidden (and what Girard terms *mimetic*) rivalry it seeks a way to restore order from the threatening chaos and it does so by searching out a scapegoat, an individual (or group) who can be blamed for the current crisis.[40] The chosen victim needs to be marginal to the society as a whole and lack the ability to retaliate or seek vengeance, while also being sufficiently vulnerable to being seized, accused, and killed.[41] Once the chosen victim has been identified the society carries out the murder, and because it is really believed that the scapegoat caused the crisis, peace returns to the community following their removal.[42] Over time, the society begins to see the chance victim as the one who brought salvation from the crisis and saved the community from possible destruction. Thus, the scapegoat is transformed into a hero and in some cases even deified, as it appears that they alone brought peace and reconciliation.

Girard argues that this mechanism is quite possibly the constitutive element of hominization,[43] but Heim (who remains cautious about such global statements) suggests that one does not have to accept the totality of Girard's argument to recognize that "his insights are a reality actually functioning in human religion and societies" both past and present.[44] Thus, the point Heim wishes to make is not that Girard has found the cause of all culture and religion but that the scapegoating mechanism actually works, even though one might consider it horrendous that it does.

So, from this perspective, what is the soteriological function of Jesus' death? Heim contends that the narrative of Jesus' death is, in fact, two stories laid on top of one another. The first is a description of Jesus' execution as an example of the sacrificial mechanism in action. The second is the story of God's redemptive action "in, with and under" the story of the

39. Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice*, 10.

40. On mimetic rivalry see Girard, *To Double Business Bound*, 140. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 18.

41. Hunsinger, "The Politics of the Nonviolent God," 63.

42. "The purpose of the sacrifice is to restore harmony to the community, to reinforce the social fabric" (Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 9).

43. Girard's understanding of the hominization process is well summarized by Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 15–20.

44. Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice*, 11.

first.[45] It is readily evident that as a candidate for sacrifice Jesus makes a classic case. He is of humble birth, an outsider from Galilee whose healings and exorcisms have shown him to be aligned (in the minds of some) with demonic powers. His popularity and disdain for the recognized rulers and authorities has made him dangerous and he is charged with the worst possible offences both before God (blasphemy) and Roman rule (sedition). At his trial everyone abandons him and he is put to death with collective unanimity and peace is miraculously restored to the nation.[46] This latter point is recognized by both the Gospels of John (11:45–53) and Luke (23:12), an acknowledgment that indicates the appropriateness of understanding Jesus' death as an example of scapegoating violence. In fact, from this perspective, Heim comments that what is actually redeemed through Jesus' death *is* the status quo. In other words, the Gospels do present a theory about the value of redemptive violence, but it is a value believed in and propagated by the persecutors. "Atonement is precisely the good they have in mind," Heim writes, and it is this drive for sacrificial atonement that actually kills Jesus.[47]

But for the community to believe its own scapegoating lie it must be totally blind to what it is doing to the victim. For if the innocence of the victim was to be exposed, then the death of the victim would be revealed as a murder (and hence be unjustified) and its efficacy as a saving event would be completely undermined.[48] Indeed, Heim argues that this is exactly what the passion narratives declare and this revelation is what God is unveiling through the cross. The narrative certainly includes the sacrificial mechanism, it is still there in all its horrific detail but the difference now is that *we see it*, the very fact of which undermines the effectiveness of the mechanism. Heim explains:

> The sacrificial necessity that claims Jesus is a sinful mechanism for victimization, whose rationale maintains it is necessary that one innocent person die for the good of the people. The free, loving 'necessity' that leads God to be willing to stand in the place of the scapegoat is that this is the way to unmask the sacrificial mechanism, to break its cycles of mythic reproduction,

45. Ibid., 17.

46. For the threat of conflict and return of peace from a historical perspective, see Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth*.

47. Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice*, 125.

48. "Sacrifice would not be effective if we explicitly knew what we were doing; its benefits depend on our conviction that we are doing something else" (ibid., 121).

> and to found human community on a nonsacrificial principle: solidarity with the victim, not unanimity against the victim.[49]

Heim acknowledges that this understanding could be interpreted in terms of a Gnostic revelation, making salvation a matter of mere knowledge rather than the more traditional forensic act common in other motifs.[50] But he stresses that the revelation requires a transcendent act of grace to perceive and is not something that can be arrived at from a "Pelagian" operation.[51] Nevertheless, there is a strong horizontal dynamic in this soteriology; a redeemed community is one that is not based on the scapegoat mechanism.

But does Heim believe that this was Jesus of Nazareth's intention? To endure the evil of sacrificial violence in order to unmask it and thus release his followers into a non-sacrificial community? He believes it likely, suggesting there are indicators in the Gospels that Jesus was aware of the scapegoating mechanism and that he acted in such a way that it would be revealed. He begins his analysis with Matthew 23:27–39, the so-called Pharisaic woes in which Jesus casts himself in a long line of prophetic succession. Far from stressing his uniqueness, Jesus emphasizes the fact that he is being treated just as all the prophets have been treated. Indeed, he goes further than this and identifies himself with all the righteous blood that has been shed on the earth, from Abel to Zechariah, the last of the recorded murders in the Hebrew Scriptures. Heim finds in this identification a deliberate connection with all the scapegoating victims of history; Jesus chooses to align himself with them.

There are two other possible references to the scapegoat mechanism in the "Pharisaic woes." The first is Jesus' use of the phrase "whitewashed tombs," which for Heim must go beyond a general condemnation of hypocrisy to the mythical practice of sacrifice as Girard describes it. The reason for this is that the tombs are described as beautiful on the outside (just like the mythical cover stories and the social benefits that result from the sacrificial death) yet full of bones and filth within (corresponding to the bodies of the victims, along with the unacknowledged lies and the arbitrary violence—the uncleanness—of their persecution). The second reference is understood from Jesus' emphasis on deception. The Pharisees

49. Ibid., 114.

50. Ibid., 13. See the interesting discussion in Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 83–85.

51. Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice*, 197. Anthony Bartlett explains this point particularly well. Bartlett, *Cross Purposes*, 148–49.

claim that they would not have taken part in the shedding of innocent blood had they lived in the days of their forefathers. But Jesus responds by criticizing them for their own re-creation of the very same scapegoating dynamic that was evidenced in the prior murders. Heim notes that since Jesus' comments were directed at the pious and virtuous Pharisees, it cannot be a lack of morality or ethics that is primarily in view. "Jesus is not talking about something that bad people do and good people don't. It is the mechanism by which the community of people, good and bad, maintains itself."[52]

That Jesus understood this to be the case is found, suggests Heim, in the Synoptic quotation of Psalm 118:22–23. This Psalm draws attention to the fact that it is the rejected stone that becomes the cornerstone, an apt analogy of the rejected victim becoming the structural foundation of corporate harmony. It is, therefore, not a matter of a few "bad apples" that take matters into their own hands but society itself that requires the rejected stone to build upon. So what is the "Lord's doing" that is "marvelous in our eyes"? It is the fact that the mechanism is now unveiled and so undone.[53] This is why, when Jesus quotes Psalm 22 from the cross, it is not so much a cry of dereliction as an acknowledgement that the righteous victim, indeed, all righteous victims will be vindicated by God. The cry of forsakenness functions to reveal the scapegoat mechanism at precisely the moment when the mechanism's deception is normally at its height.[54] Hence, Jesus can pray for the nation's forgiveness for they act in ignorance, not aware of the controlling mechanism that Jesus reveals through his death.

Heim is more than ready to acknowledge that his argument is not all that can, or indeed, should be said about Jesus' understanding and we should not mistake him for presenting some kind of satisfactory whole.[55] However, he is convinced that Jesus' willingness to face death needs to be explained in terms of that death's revelatory quality. If we do not, then we obscure the unveiling of the sacrificial mechanism at best, and continue to perpetuate the myth of sacred violence at worst. On the contrary, says Heim,

> God takes advantage of the occasion of death in general to directly address a universal feature of human sin. God is willing to die for us, to bear our sin in this way, because we desperately

52. Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice*, 121.
53. Ibid., 123.
54. Ibid., 121.
55. Ibid., ix.

> need deliverance from the particular sin this death exemplifies. Death and resurrection are located where they can make an irreversible impact on this horizontal evil in human life. God breaks the grip of scapegoating by stepping into the place of a victim, becoming a victim who cannot be hidden or mythologized. God acts not to affirm the suffering of the innocent one as the price of peace, but to reverse it.[56]

It must be acknowledged that all the necessary pieces of the soteriological puzzle are present in Heim's argument, but nonetheless, the question still needs to be asked as to whether he has correctly characterized the meaning that Jesus created for his death. The focus on Jesus' message and ministry in the Gospels is not obviously a revelation of the scapegoat mechanism *per se* but the coming of the kingdom of God. This is what Jesus proclaimed when he began his ministry and the consensus of historical Jesus scholarship is to locate Jesus' intentions for his ministry within the light of how he understood that event. It might, of course, be possible to argue that the revelation of the scapegoat mechanism is included in the wider scope of the "coming of the kingdom," but Heim certainly makes no effort to do so.[57] Even if he had, it is true to say that no historical Jesus scholar has yet picked up the Girardian insight and tried to square it with what is known from historical research. Perhaps such an endeavor is still to come, but at present there is little doubt that Girardian anthropology gets the rough end of the historical stick.[58]

John Milbank: Being Reconciled

Our third and final example is considerably different from the previous two because Milbank's work *Being Reconciled* is not strictly an atonement discussion.[59] His thesis is far broader, focusing as it does on the category of divine "gift," which he expresses positively through creation, grace, the incarnation and finally ecclesiology.[60] Of course, atonement too is a gift

56. Ibid., 194.

57. In fact, in Heim's work the kingdom of God is not referenced with any significance at all.

58. For example I was unable to locate any reference to Girardian anthropology in Dunn's comprehensive *Jesus Remembered*, and only a brief dismissive footnote in his earlier analysis of Pauline theology. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*; Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 213 n. 22.

59. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*.

60. On the type of "gifts" see particularly Rowland, "Divine Gifts."

and Milbank turns to it midway through the book in an attempt to explain how humanity's desperately needed gift, that of *forgiveness*, can be appropriated and effected. However, like all gifts it can also be refused and Milbank describes this refusal particularly in terms of evil and violence, the discussion of which takes place in the first two chapters.

Without getting drawn into his detailed argument we can note that Milbank is especially critical of any attempt to give evil its own ontological right, affirming instead the Augustinian conception of evil as a privation, which he contends is the only way to adequately make sense of evil's inexplicability. But surd as it may be, evil can nonetheless be overcome and this is done, says Milbank, through the act of forgiveness. Yet he also argues strongly that humanity is incapable of forgiving unless it first receives the divine gift of forgiveness, offered in and through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.[61] This, then, is what is defined as atonement: the divine enabling of human forgiveness. While an interesting take on redemption, Milbank's work is of primary relevance to us because he spends a whole chapter defending the *historicity* of the Gospel passion narratives. And as history, there must be a coherence between event and meaning, a coherence he attempts to locate in the depths of Jesus' abandonment.[62] But as before, Milbank's historical Jesus also takes the shape of his own soteriological presentation and there is little here that one could connect to historical Jesus scholarship. But before we engage in that discussion, a brief explanation of Milbank's thesis is required.

Since humanity is incapable of forgiveness without a prior transcendent act, Milbank turns to the incarnation to locate that transcendent act within the human sphere. Appropriating a high Christology, the argument is made that Jesus, the God-man, fulfils the role of the unique sovereign victim and by virtue of the divine *Logos*, is able to plumb the full depths and implications of suffering. "In this way a single suffering became also a sovereign suffering, capable of representing all suffering and of forgiving on behalf of all victims."[63] Moreover, the unique sovereign victim is able to forgive at the instantaneous moment of hurt because, unlike other human beings, Christ is able to experience suffering in an "accepting, actively receptive fashion."[64] Hence, for Christ to suffer is at one and the same time

61. Milbank defines five *aporias* of human forgiveness, discussion of which would take us too far afield. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 50–60.

62. In this it is similar to the Girardian approach but Milbank's analysis has its distinctive features.

63. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 61.

64. Ibid.

for Christ to forgive. An outcome that can only be described as a divine gift. Importantly, such a gift only becomes forgiveness when in "Christ it is *not* God forgiving us but humanity forgiving humanity."[65] Divine redemption is, therefore, found in the human reception of the gift of the capacity for forgiveness. And to emphasize the transcendent nature of this gift, Milbank comments that it must first be given by the Trinity to Christ's humanity before it can be subsequently offered to us. And humanity can only appropriate intra-human forgiveness by virtue of the Christ passing that capability to us through the "hypostatic presence" of the Holy Spirit.[66] It is, then, only the ecclesial community that has the capability to extend human forgiveness, for it is only by the power of the Holy Spirit that we can receive and subsequently offer such a gift.

The implications of Milbank's position certainly warrant considerable discussion, but our specific question is how does Milbank appropriate the intention of Jesus? From the brief analysis above it would seem that he does not. The high Christology invoked operates without historical interest and there is very little to suggest that the intention of Jesus of Nazareth could possibly have any value. Yet Milbank immediately follows this chapter on the Incarnation with a thorough defense of the historicity of the passion narratives in which he does address the intention of Jesus even if not directly. That he does so becomes very clear in his description of the coherence between historical event and imbued meaning, a coherence which is said to be all the more important because the incarnation guarantees that such created meaning will be universally effective.[67] And what was that meaning? As might be expected from the discussion above, Milbank contends that Jesus through his death intended to enter into solidarity with each and every human being as the sovereign victim. But he also notes that in the Gospel narrative Jesus did not just suffer as a victim but as a complete outcast, totally rejected by all of humanity. This emphasis on Jesus' victimhood is similar to that of Heim. Milbank, however, does not

65. Ibid., 61–62. For Milbank, God can never be a victim since it is impossible for God to suffer loss and hence there is no need for God to forgive. Singular support for this position is drawn from the mystical writings of Julian of Norwich who famously argued that God does not need to forgive, since God is never offended.

66. Ibid., 62.

67. "There are no events outside the assignment of meanings, and there are no construable meanings not ultimately including some reference to an active rearrangement of things in time" (ibid., 94).

take a Girardian approach here, but turns instead to the insight of Giorgio Agamben and his account of the *homo sacer* in Roman jurisprudence.[68]

> [According to Pompeius Festus,] after the succession of the plebs in Rome, it was granted to the plebeians to have the right to pursue to the death (singly or collectively it is implied) someone whom they have as a body condemned. Such an individual was declared *homo sacer*, and his irregular death was not exactly homicide, nor punishment, nor sacrifice. . . . Such a person was *sacer*, simply in the sense of cast out, utterly abandoned.[69]

Milbank contends that the passion narratives give an account of Jesus' death in precisely these terms: successively abandoned by Jewish sovereignty, Roman sovereignty and by the mob, Jesus goes to his death as an outcast, as a *homo sacer*. The implication of this position is enormous, for as the death of a *homo sacer* Jesus' crucifixion cannot be understood exactly as a murder, an execution or even a sacrifice—for these all imply that Jesus' humanity was still recognized. Instead, Jesus' death is the death of an outcast who Milbank contends had already been reduced in the consciousness of the mob to a level "beneath humanity," to that of "half-animality."[70] But it is here, outside the city, where the God-man offers the ultimate gift of forgiveness. Dying in solidarity with every victim, Jesus forgives on behalf of every victim and makes the way possible for human beings to truly forgive each other.

This understanding of the death of Jesus as *homo sacer* has several implications for Milbank's conception of the historical Jesus. First of all, in dying a sub-human death Jesus could not have died the death of a martyr, as a witness to some kind of universal cause. For if Jesus (the man) did actively imbue his death with some kind of meaning then he would not have died a sub-human death. On the contrary, as he was led away to be crucified it must have seemed that he went to his death at "the whim of a drunken mob," which ostensibly makes it a senseless and meaningless event.[71] To suggest otherwise (i.e., to give Jesus' death historical meaning) is to give dignity to Jesus' death, and to give him dignity misses the point of his death as a *homo sacer*. Milbank does not spell the point out, but it is

68. For his earlier critique of Girard, see Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 392–98.

69. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 90.

70. Ibid., 97.

71. Ibid., 96.

implied that if Jesus' death had historical meaning then it could not have been in solidarity with every victim.

The second point has to do with Jesus' mission. Milbank contends that what is understood and rejected by the mob is Jesus' claim to be God; nothing more, nothing less.[72] This means that the resentment towards Jesus expressed by both the high priests (Mark 15:10) and by the people (Matt 27:18) could only have originated out of envy, an envy not of Jesus' popularity or remarkable authority but of his claim to be God in the flesh. This, says Milbank, is the real reason why the people "screamed out their resentment to Pilate."[73] For even if the people misinterpreted Jesus' actions in the Temple as a threat of destruction (since, according to Milbank, Jesus was "clearly" protecting the temple's integrity and was not out to destroy it), their self-deceit as protectors of the Temple remained nothing but a shabby cover for their envy of Jesus' "awesome elevation."[74]

Finally, Milbank notes that even if the Gospels did contend that Jesus died for the truth, it was not possible for that "truth" to be publically displayed at the time. As a *homo sacer*, Jesus' death had no meaning for anyone—including the disciples—and only became meaningful once the resurrection enabled such reflection. Hence, while Jesus' death was never without divine meaning, such meaning was not visible at the moment of his death. It is the resurrection that makes the meaning visible, for it is then that the capacity to forgive is offered to those who cowered in fear behind the locked doors of that upper room.

When, in our fourth chapter, we come to asking contemporary historical Jesus scholarship what it is that Jesus may have actually intended for his death, it will become very obvious that the intention of Milbank's Jesus as described here differs markedly from those accounts. For one thing, it is very clear that Jesus did have a cause—the inauguration of the kingdom of God—and hence, a meaningful martyr's death cannot be summarily ruled out. In addition, Jesus' actions at the Last Supper (something that Milbank does not address) have significant influence on the way his earlier actions in the Temple should be understood, and an envious rejection of Jesus is not all that apparent.

However, of more theological concern is the argument that Jesus goes willingly to his death merely to die in solidarity with every victim. Does this understanding really acknowledge the power of the incarnation?

72. Ibid., 95–96.
73. Ibid., 96.
74. Ibid.

Or does it function to drive a wedge between the life of Jesus and his death, making the former merely the prelude to the latter? Despite Milbank's theological insistence on the importance of the incarnation, his presentation can be criticized at this point. An unnecessary dichotomy is introduced between Jesus' life and death, a dichotomy that reinforces the existence of two disparate crosses in contemporary atonement research. So once again we find in Milbank that, as in Mann and Heim, Jesus' intention (or lack thereof) is described in terms that support the theological motif in question.

These examples could readily be multiplied but enough has been said to make the point. The intention that Jesus of Nazareth had for his death, *as far as can be determined from historical research*, is not well addressed in contemporary atonement discussion. Either Jesus' intention is considered completely irrelevant, or it is portrayed as reflecting the atonement motif in question and thus changes dramatically from one discussion to the next. In reality, both approaches have similar results: whatever it was that Jesus intended his death to achieve has very little bearing on the discussion at hand. But I ask again, should this be the case? It is my contention that the recent work on the historical Jesus does have a significant contribution to make to an understanding of the cross, and this contribution should be incorporated as far as possible into our presentations of the atonement.

In other words, I do not believe that it is sufficient to make the death of Jesus a datum of reflection in and of itself. Jesus' death is most securely a feature of his life, and must therefore be construed in its historical dynamic. Roger Haight puts it well:

> [His death] was due to his message, his preaching it, and his actions. His crucifixion was determined by the measure in which he confronted people or challenged their interests. Jesus' death flowed from the radicality and seriousness of his message; from his perspective, it was a function of his fidelity to his mission or cause, the cause of God, a mission of salvation to the people around him. Jesus gave his life for the kingdom of God, and all the evidence points to the fact that he gave it freely.[75]

Jesus' death is therefore connected to his life and must be understood within that context. Of course, today we are used to approaching Jesus' death dogmatically and in terms of abstract symbolic categories, but this should never blind us to the actual historicity of the cross. If Jesus' life had meaning (and I have yet to read anyone who suggests that Jesus lived a

75. Haight, *Jesus*, 85–86.

meaningless life), then it is also appropriate to ask what meaning he may have constituted for his death. And the answer, however tentative, should have some bearing on how theologians present the saving message of the Gospel to the community with which they are engaged.

But it will be immediately obvious to anyone familiar with the current state of atonement reflection that this position presents us with a significant challenge; for to uphold the Christian doctrine of Jesus of Nazareth as the Incarnate One and to also insist that Jesus constituted meaning for his death is to argue that divine meaning can be created for contingent events (even evil ones). This contention opens up a twenty-first century Pandora's Box because it insists that salvific meaning can be derived from violence and suffering, a present *aporia* if there ever was one. This is not a trivial concern and is a major motivation for the development of some of the more recent atonement discussions. It is, therefore, more than appropriate for us to spend some time addressing this question.

A Potential Hurdle: The "Myth" of Redemptive Suffering

To argue for the importance of Jesus' own intention for the cross in the development of atonement motifs immediately confronts us with a considerable challenge. The fundamental problem is this: If we claim that Jesus intended his suffering and death to have divinely constituted meaning then do we not also give divine value to suffering and death and thereby create divine validation for the perpetuation and/or enduring of other forms of human suffering? This at least is the fear, but it is a fear that is not merely derived from abstract theological concerns but from the lived experience of those who have been abused and oppressed. Liberation and Feminist theologians particularly draw attention to the fact that a theology of redemptive suffering does nothing to free people from their own experience of suffering and can actually have the opposite effect, encouraging them to remain within their oppressive and abusive situations. This is perceived, quite rightly, as abhorrent and has given rise to a fresh movement in both academic and popular theology that avoids any suggestion that God finds value in suffering and death. In itself, this raises questions of theodicy (to which we will have to return in the next chapter), but it does help explain just why the traditional models of atonement are held to thrust theology into this modern *aporia*. As J. Denny Weaver convincingly demonstrates, each traditional motif (including the Abelardian) relies upon the violence

of the cross to effect salvation, and this reliance is said to do nothing but perpetuate the "myth" of redemptive suffering.[76] If, then, we are to contend that Jesus did create salvific meaning out of the sinful event of his own suffering and death then we must also adequately contend with this challenge.

An Overview of the Problem

In her inimitable style, Delores Williams castigates traditional atonement theology for its blood-lust, remarking at the women's re-imagining conference of 1993, "I don't think we need a theory of the atonement at all… I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff."[77] Her comments sparked significant controversy at the time and in the years following her perspective has often been repeated. To be sure, contemporary discussion on the atonement is still convinced that humanity is in need of salvation, but as Williams hoped, the idea that God could only forgive if somebody suffered has more or less become anathematized in recent Western scholarship. After all, is not the God of the Gospels a God of peace, love and forgiveness? A God who is revealed by Jesus of Nazareth to be the God who unashamedly welcomes home the prodigal without thought of vengeance, or the demand of satisfaction? How, then, if this picture is to be believed, can God be associated with the horrendous death of God's own Son, even if such suffering is for so grand a purpose as human redemption?

For many the obvious answer is that God cannot be so associated. Attitudes which are roundly condemned as morally reprehensible in human beings cannot, in any sense, be promoted as justifiable for God.[78] In any event, it is assumed to be axiomatic that violence is incontrovertibly opposed to the goodness of God.[79] Violence destroys, divides, sup-

76. Weaver, "Violence in Christian Theology." See also Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*.

77. Quoted by Cyre, "Fallout Escalates," 71. In a more recent article Williams has continued this line of thought: "There is nothing of God in the blood of the cross" (Williams, "Black Women's Surrogacy Experience," 32).

78. Indeed, Brock and Parker remark somewhat provocatively that if Jesus' "executioners" did what was historically necessary for salvation, then state terrorism is a good thing and one must conclude that torture and murder are the will of God! Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, 49.

79. This is nothing new. As early as the second century we find Marcion striving to inoculate the God of the New Testament from any kind of violence by attributing

presses, abuses and nullifies. It is the direct opposite of *at-one-ment* and is, therefore, surely incapable of bringing about reconciliation. Thus, any attempt to shroud the violence of the cross with an aura of divine ordination must be summarily rejected. To not do so is to insist that violence is God's way of transforming people and communities into greater spiritual well-being.[80] It is to insist that violence is an appropriate mechanism for spiritual transformation. It is to insist that acts of evil are sometimes to be celebrated rather than condemned.

But perhaps the most significant criticism directed against any attempt to make the violence of the cross meaningful is the belief that such meaning (a) not only justifies violence but encourages *further* acts of violence to be done in its name; and (b) promotes the ongoing passive acceptance of personal suffering. It is, of course, to Christianity's shame that it has a history of sanctioning acts of violence and it can readily be demonstrated that the doctrine of the atonement has done little to prevent such acts.[81] Anselm's supporting visit to the front lines of the First Crusade whilst in the midst of writing his *Cur Deus Homo?* is cited as an obvious example, but both Augustine and Luther, neither a stranger to the atonement debate, were ultimately prepared to lend their theological weight to violent acts of repression.[82] Understandably, contemporary theologians find this to be a scandal. The cross was never meant to be a standard of war; it is an agent of reconciliation, a marker of divine love, a moment of unquestionable compassion. Inherently violent in itself of course, but by no means should the violence imparted upon that one individual be interpreted to provide justification for inflicting violence upon another.

The second criticism is particularly emphasized by both Feminist and Liberation theologians who readily cite instances in which the oppressed

all divine violence, including the violence surrounding the death of Jesus, to the Old Testament Demiurge.

80. Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, 44.

81. See for example, Gorringe, *God's Just Vengeance*.

82. I am not suggesting here that Anselm wrote *Cur Deus Homo?* as a theological buttress for Pope Urban II's call to arms. In fact, there is some evidence that Anselm was actually unsympathetic to the Crusade's cause, primarily because he felt that it was a distraction from the true calling to spiritual growth (Southern, *Portrait*, 169). However, it must be said that the publication of *Cur Deus Homo?* had no detrimental effect on the Crusade's perceived theological legitimacy. Further discussion on the link between atonement theology and violence can be found in Bartlett, *Cross Purposes*. Merback, "Reverberations of Guilt and Violence," 37–50. For a bemusing description of atonement theories as "nothing less than terrorism" see Peterman, "Redemption (Theology Of)," 11:985.

and abused were encouraged to go back to their situations of suffering precisely because of the meaning said to be inherent in the death of Jesus Christ. But far from being liberating, such situations merely function to perpetuate the oppression of the individual/community, encouraging them to passively acquiesce in their own suffering in the vain hope that something "good" might come from it. Brock and Parker want to know what good comes from a battered wife being sent back to her abusive husband by the parish priest only to be violently killed in one last terrifying outburst?[83] If such tragedies are the price of a theology of redemptive suffering, then it is a price that few are now willing to pay. Darby Kathleen Ray draws the conclusion rather effectively:

> To make meaning out of suffering and death . . . merely perpetuates them, and any religion or belief that does such a thing is demonic. God is a God of life, not death; God is life-giving, not death-dealing.[84]

The clear assumption here is that divine meaning is equivalent to divine justification and thus if the cross is to have divine meaning then its violence must also be justified. I will spend a fair portion of the next chapter challenging this assumption but it is certainly apparent that Ray believes this to be the case. Her emphasis on what God can and cannot do is arguably designed to "protect" God from the claim that the cross represents an example of divinely justified violence. In a way this effort is reminiscent of the earlier work of Dorothee Soelle, who famously argued in *Suffering* that God could in no way be involved in the death of Jesus of Nazareth, for to do so would inevitably portray God as sadistic.[85] Any attempt to maintain that salvation was somehow dependent on God causing the death of Jesus (whether directly or indirectly), would stand in danger of this portrayal. This is essentially her complaint against Moltmann's *Crucified God*, a work that she contends presents the quintessential argument for theological sadism. Left unchallenged such a view, she says, would have the potential to encourage Christians to ultimately—though probably unconsciously—love, honor and worship "the executioner."[86]

83. Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, 15–20.
84. Ray, *Deceiving the Devil*, 84.
85. Soelle, *Suffering*, 26.
86. Ibid., 28.

A Potential Way Forward

The conclusion to draw from this discussion is that the contemporary Western atonement debate is very concerned to do two things. The first is that God should be heralded as a God of love who does not engage in acts of violence, and should not in any way be said to derive value from such acts. And second, an appropriate atonement theology will not provide divine validation to any act of evil, for to do so inevitably perpetuates further acts of evil (whether performed or endured) in the name of God.

These twin points are enlightening because to my mind they reveal a more fundamental concern with the nature of God, and God's activity in creation, than with atonement theology *per se*. Of course, it is rightly argued that the lived experience of the oppressed and abused demands a theological understanding of God—and particularly of God's actions in salvation—that is unquestionably liberating, and incapable of any articulation in which oppression could somehow continue to be justified.[87] But it is more assumed than argued that this desire also requires the theologian to completely abandon any attempt to find meaning in the suffering and death of Jesus of Nazareth. I acknowledge that this is a possible conclusion, but I contend that this would be the case if, and only if, it could also be demonstrated that the creation of divine meaning out of an evil event *requires by necessity the event itself to be divinely caused*. But is such a conclusion really tenable? Is God the necessary cause of evil events? And if one wants to contend that the answer is no, does that thereby prevent an understanding in which God is able to create meaning out of the event without justifying and validating the event itself?

That divine meaning does equate to divine validation seems to be the prevailing assumption in contemporary research, but it effectively denies the possibility of either (a) divine meaning without divine causation, or at least (b) that an evil contingent event can have divine meaning created out of it. And herein lies the failure, I believe, of much of the current discussion on the atonement. In its justifiable eagerness to decry acts of violence and oppression, the debate also redefines God's relationship to creation (that is, the necessary to the contingent). Again, the motive for doing so may be healthy, but the results of this argument have major consequences that go beyond that of negating the possibility of divine violence to include every facet of the creator/creature relationship. For this reason alone an

87. This point is made very clear in Brown and Parker, "For God So Loved the World?," 1–30.

investigation into the relationship between divine action and the cross of Jesus is warranted, but a reason enhanced because what is at stake is the very possibility of salvific meaning itself.

In conclusion then, if we wish to uphold that there is divine meaning in the suffering and death of Jesus of Nazareth, the fundamental task is not to defend atonement motifs against the charge that they perpetuate suffering, but to argue that God can create meaning out of the cross event without requiring that event to be divinely caused. If such an argument can be presented then the contention that the historical intention of Jesus of Nazareth should have a role in faith's understanding of salvation can proceed without fear that it will be understood to justify acts of oppression and abuse.

The Road Ahead

The discussion thus far has emphasized the importance of historical meaning for our understanding of a theological event. But the task here, as I have already indicated, is not to try and prove the value of Christian salvation from an analysis of history. Salvation is, at the end of the day, a matter of personal faith and lived experience. One can point to its reality in the lives of millions of people around the world but one can never prove matters of faith from an investigation into a particular event that occurred at a particular place and time in history. However, it is also true that the doctrine of Christian salvation unashamedly finds its fulcrum in the historical events of Jesus' death and resurrection, and I believe that Christian theology cannot afford to lose the historical actuality of the cross underneath its symbolic power. In this, I agree with Milbank: along with the resurrection, it is the doctrine of the incarnation that imbues the historical life of Jesus of Nazareth with theological significance. To somehow draw a line at the resurrection and treat what lies beneath it as insignificant matters of historical interest, is to introduce a dichotomy between the historical value of Jesus' preaching and teaching and the theological significance of his death. On the contrary, the value to theology of Jesus' life is far from limited to the sheer fact of his death and resurrection and it is, therefore, appropriate to ask what Jesus may have intended his death to achieve.

However, in saying this I am not suggesting that we can simply move from historical reconstruction to theological significance by way, for example, of assigning metaphysical implications to particular events.[88] How

88. On the problematic nature of this see Haight, *Jesus*, 86 n. 105.

the intention of Jesus is to be successfully appropriated is something that we will need to work towards and is fundamentally dependent upon how we view the relationship between faith and history. But in itself this task raises some very important methodological issues, so a brief explanation as to how we will approach the question is also in order.

The next chapter presents an argument for understanding divine action in a way that does not negate the possibility of divine meaning being created out of contingent acts. To do this I will draw primarily upon the theology of Thomas Aquinas as mediated through Bernard Lonergan, since it is my contention that the classical doctrine of God provides a sufficient solution to the perceived problem of redemptive suffering. I am well aware that not all would agree, and some of the related criticisms of the classical doctrine will need to be addressed as we proceed. However, the primary purpose here is to provide adequate and coherent evidence for the possibility of there being divine meaning in a contingent event, a meaning that can be said to have universal significance without inevitably requiring that event to be transposed into the necessary.

Having demonstrated the coherence of this conclusion it becomes possible to comprehend the intention of Jesus of Nazareth as having divine significance. This is a Christological assertion to be sure, but as has already been made clear, this work is not an attempt to derive Jesus' divine status through historical means but to ask of history what it might contribute to a theology of the cross. Hence, I am not concerned to avoid a theological perspective when it comes to approaching the historical Jesus.

Once more this contention requires some defense, and the third chapter provides that discussion as it examines not just historiography but also the relationship between faith and history. Drawing primarily upon Bernard Lonergan's notion of critical realism as its methodological foundation, the chapter argues that not only can a historical event be reliably known, but that such knowledge can be adequately appropriated and incorporated into a theological understanding of that event. The reasons for turning to Lonergan here is threefold. Firstly, having widely drawn upon Lonergan in the previous chapter, it is more than coherent to continue to draw upon his insights as they relate to the faith-history dialectic. Secondly, Lonergan's description of critical realism is foundational to Ben Meyer's presentation of Jesus of Nazareth and through Meyer's work has had significant (and acknowledged) influence on N. T. Wright, James Dunn and Scot McKnight.[89] Hence, there is an inherent consistency in our

89. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*; Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*; Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*; McKnight, *Jesus and His Death*.

discussion on Jesus' intention since we draw heavily on these particular authors. Finally, Lonergan's further conception of constitutive meaning provides a link between Dunn's idea of *impact* and the transformation of meaning that results. Facing a challenge to their existing world mediated by meaning, the disciples were forced to respond to the meaning constituted by Jesus of Nazareth, a response that is indicative of the meaning itself. From this perspective, the Gospels remain historically valuable despite their acknowledged theological agenda for the very reason that they are a reflection of the engendered impact.

However, for meaning to have an impact it must also be carried and it is the carriers of meaning that provide the necessary framework for historical investigation. Drawing again on Lonergan's understanding, three carriers of meaning (the incarnate, linguistic and symbolic) are identified as being of particular value and these carriers become the structural premise for the following analysis into the intentions of Jesus of Nazareth.

So what meaning, then, did Jesus of Nazareth create for his death? This is the fundamental question of the fourth chapter and it is approached, as was said, through an investigation into the incarnate, linguistic and symbolic carriers of meaning. From the outset, however, it must be recognized that a thorough investigation into the historical Jesus, even from the limited perspective of what he may have intended for his own death, remains impossible within the confines of the present project. We will therefore limit the investigation to those scholars who have embraced a critical realist model of historiography and indeed, given the discussion above this should come as no surprise. Furthermore, one of the benefits of a critical realist perspective is that it allows for the carriers of meaning to be meaningfully investigated. While only a selection of the relevant data can be questioned, enough can be gleaned to draw, albeit tentatively, a conclusion about what Jesus intended his own death to achieve.

Again, it must be emphasized that the import of this study is not to develop a new presentation of the historical Jesus, nor is it to direct theology to the "only" meaning inherent in the cross. The point here is to investigate the meaning that Jesus constituted for his death and to bring that judgment to bear on contemporary understandings of the atonement.

The final chapter is a discussion on how this might be done in practice. Drawing upon the distinction between judgment and understanding, the chapter argues that the salvific judgment that Jesus constituted for his death is able to be understood in differing, and contextually sensitive ways, without negating the intention of Jesus himself. This does not mean,

however, that all contemporary models of atonement are equally valuable nor, indeed, equally faithful to the intention of Jesus. In particular those models which fail to accept that divine meaning can be created for suffering and death cannot be considered faithful to Jesus' intention, and must for that reason be considered unfaithful to the Christian tradition itself. But it is argued, that models of atonement that go beyond the understanding that Jesus articulated are not necessarily wrong, as long as they remain faithful to the constituted salvific intent.

Context-sensitive articulations of salvation are necessary if Christian theology is to continue to impact the world for Christ. It is, however, the present contention that a contextual presentation does not require the minimization or abandonment of the historical intention of Jesus of Nazareth. On the contrary, the salvific meaning that God creates for the evil event of Jesus' death is revealed in the constituted meaning with which Jesus imbues that death. It is, therefore, appropriate to investigate what Jesus may have intended his death to achieve and having done so, to investigate how that intention might be successfully appropriated for contemporary articulations of that saving grace. However, the first step is to examine the relationship between divine action and the cross of Jesus of Nazareth. To this we now turn.